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SUBJECT: U.S.-BASED NGOS IN SYRIA COMPLAIN ABOUT DIFFICULT
OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

REF: A. DAMASCUS 766

[1](#)B. 08 DAMASCUS 233

Classified By: CDA Chuck Hunter for reasons 1.4 b, d.

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Country Directors of three of the four U.S.-based NGOs in Syria told us in a joint meeting on November 2 they continue to face significant challenges in operating in the country. Hussien Ibrahim of International Medical Corps (IMC), Gordana Ivkovic-Grujic of International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Evelyn Zakhary of Mercy Corps said working in Syria has always been difficult for NGOs, but that three recent developments are further complicating their work: 1) the lack of implementation of Decree 34, issued by the SARG in December 2008 to specify procedures for NGOs to register and operate in Syria; 2) the withdrawal of several NGOs from Syria after failing to reach memorandums of understanding with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC); and 3) increased difficulties in obtaining visas for international staff. The country directors added that tension between the SARC and various ministries over which government entities control NGO operations in the country is posing additional problems. END SUMMARY.

"WE DON'T KNOW WHAT THE RULES ARE"

[1](#)2. (C) The country directors of IMC, IRC, and Mercy Corps told us on November 2 the normally difficult operating environment for NGOs in Syria is becoming increasingly challenging due to several recent developments. "Working in Syria is an operational nightmare and more difficult than any other country I've been in," the IRC's Ivkovic-Grujic said. Foremost among their concerns is the SARG's continuing failure to implement Decree 34, issued in December 2008 to specify how NGOs can register and operate in Syria.

[1](#)3. (C) As a result, the country directors reported, some NGOs are operating under memorandums of understanding with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) while others are told they must abide by rules provided them by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) or other ministries. The result is inconsistent treatment by the SARG of NGOs operating in Syria and confusion on the part of NGOs. "We don't know what the rules are," Ivkovic-Grujic lamented. "One day they tell me I need the Ministry of Education to approve something, and then the Ministry of Education tells me to go to the MFA. Decree 34 was supposed to solve this," she added.

COMPLAINTS ABOUT SARC OVERSIGHT

[1](#)4. (C) Both Gordana Ivkovic-Grujic and IMC's Hussien Ibrahim criticized the SARC for the control it holds over many NGOs operating in Syria. Any NGO seeking to work here must obtain SARC permission by submitting proposed projects, sources of funding, and resource needs. The SARC normally takes a minimum of 4-6 weeks to review; unless the project has been worked out in advance, most proposals end up being rejected

or delayed while NGOs answer questions and resubmit their proposals, starting all over. "If you don't partner with a specific ministry, then you get the SARC and that's difficult," Ibrahim declared. He added the SARC sometimes engages in power struggles with various ministries regarding oversight of NGOs. The country directors attributed the SARC's actions to the ambitions of SARC President Abdul Rahman Attar. "He's a big personality, and one of the richest, most powerful men in Syria and he doesn't want to lose control over NGOs to the MFA or any other ministry," Ibrahim concluded.

15. (C) Ibrahim said the SARC also imposes stricter caps on the number of international staff NGOs can hire; the SARC also insists on low salary caps for Syrian employees that make it difficult for NGOs to retain local staff. "Those NGOs that are lucky enough to operate outside SARC, like the Agha Khan Foundation, can pay their employees more, and then those organizations get all the best local talent," he complained.

16. (C) "We are having problems with the SARC and Attar right now," Ivkovic-Grujic agreed. She said approval for several IRC programs has been held up for months, with no official explanation. Friends in SARC told her IRC was being "investigated" because it was one of 14 NGOs expelled from Darfour by the Sudanese government. Ivkovic-Grujic related that she wrote a letter to Attar asking for assistance but received little help. She said she recently heard IRC has been "cleared" by SARG officials looking into the organization's expulsion from Sudan, and hopes her programs will be approved shortly. The IRC Board of Directors visited

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Syria last week and met with Attar (ref. A). Ivkovic-Grujic reported the meetings went well and Attar promised to help, but she said she is frustrated with the SARC's oversight. "I have to keep getting no-cost extensions for my programs because the SARC won't help us," she said.

17. (C) Mercy Corps' Zakhary said her organization decided to avoid SARC oversight altogether by working with several ministries and local partners. When Ibrahim and Ivkovic-Grujic asked Zakhary how Mercy Corps managed to avoid the SARC umbrella, she said: "We were able to do this through the help of important local contacts." (NOTE: Mercy Corps focuses its programs on IT training and is partnered with the Syrian Computer Society, a government-approved NGO once headed by President al-Asad. END NOTE.) But Zakhary added NGOs who choose to work outside SARC pay a price. "The United Nations and its organizations will not work with us, and we won't get any funding from them unless we are under the SARC umbrella," she explained. On balance, however, Zakhary concluded Mercy Corps still prefers to work outside SARC.

18. (C) They agreed many NGOs would prefer that the SARG implemented Decree 34 and a uniform system of NGO registration and operation. They said many NGO country directors would prefer to work with MFA Director of International Organizations Milad Atieh, but SARC and Attar resist their efforts to do so. "For the moment, SARC is really the only player for us," Ivkovic-Grujic concluded. The country directors added they are trying to gain leverage over Attar due to his candidacy for the presidency of the Committee of the International Red Cross/Red Crescent (ICRC). They believe Attar is currently trying to curry favor with foreign governments to support his candidacy, and that he might therefore be more inclined to assist NGOs. (NOTE: CDA received a letter in September from Attar seeking USG support for his candidacy. END NOTE.)

WITHDRAWAL OF NGOS CAUSES CONCERN

19. (C) The country directors said NGOs are also concerned about the recent withdrawal of several NGOs which could not

reach a memorandum of understanding with SARC or were not otherwise allowed to register with another partner. The German NGO Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB) announced at an October meeting at UNHCR headquarters that it is withdrawing from Syria after waiting a year without success to complete a memorandum of understanding with the SARC. Citing withdrawals by other NGOs like Save the Children Sweden for similar reasons, the country directors said other NGOs were concerned about their own organizations as well. Last year, Save the Children UK and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) announced their withdrawal from continuing negotiations with the SARC over a memorandum of understanding and abandoned operations in Syria (ref. B). "For those NGOs who don't have a memorandum of understanding, they know they might have to leave at any time. And for those of us who are registered, we worry that at any time it could be pulled from us," Ivkovic-Grujic said.

¶10. (C) Compounding these concerns is the persistent complaint by NGOs that the SARG delays visa issuances for expatriate staff. Each of the country directors reported difficulties this year in obtaining visas for foreign staff or visitors. Ivkovic-Grujic said she is still waiting to receive an extension on her expired visa. "Technically, I am here illegally, but every week they tell me my visa is coming and then I get nothing," she said. She added contacts in the MFA told her last week her new visa will be granted shortly, and she is optimistic in the wake of the IRC Board's visit to Syria. While the country directors conceded visas are a persistent complaint from NGOs operating in Syria, they insisted that the problem is either not improving or is getting worse.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Two years ago, only a handful of international NGOs began working on Iraq refugee assistance projects. Now, 14 such entities are operating here. This quantum leap of NGO presence, however, does not necessarily portend continuing growth. The Syrian government's reflexive instincts for micromanaging and maintaining control reflects decades of built-up mistrust for foreign entities operating in Syria. The continuing operations of the three largest US-based NGOs operating in Syria, and three of the most significant NGO partners of the USG globally, represent progress of a sort, but their common struggle underscores the difficulty with which NGOs carry out their valuable work in Syria. Our message to SARG interlocutors has been to stress the overwhelmingly positive Syrian response to the Iraqi

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refugee challenge and to recognize the positive contributions U.S. and other international NGOs here are making in the humanitarian field as well as to the well-being of Syrians themselves. Syria's desire for increased recognition of its own contributions and for international assistance with drought relief and other challenges will require further adjustments to policies and procedures for managing NGOs. SARG implementation of a uniform system of NGO registration and oversight, through Decree 34 or some other mechanism, would likely improve the situation but not altogether end the challenges these NGOs face. END COMMENT.

HUNTER